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TAGS: PHUM PGOV VM HUMANR

SUBJECT: POLITICAL PRISONERS DR. QUE AND DR. SON TRANSFERRED

Reftels: A) HCMC 1184 and previous, B) Hanoi 967 and previous

This is a joint Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City reporting cable.

1. (SBU) Summary: Political prisoners Dr. Nguyen Dan Que and Dr. Pham Hong Son have both been transferred to a prison in Thanh Hoa Province in northern Vietnam. Son is reportedly in poor health and may require surgery for a hernia. Family members have not been able to visit Que or Son, and one speculated that Son was moved to the new, more remote facility in order to punish his wife for meeting with foreign diplomats and journalists. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Mrs. Tam Van, wife of imprisoned activist Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, reported to us that in late September she sought to visit her husband in his HCMC prison. At that time, prison officials told her that her husband had been transferred to a new location that they would divulge to her "later." Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Que told us that a contact in the HCMC branch of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) informally confirmed that Dr. Que had been transferred to MPS Prison #5 in Yen Dinh District, Thanh Hoa Province (nearly 200 kilometers south of Hanoi).

3. (SBU) Mrs. Que bemoaned the fact that the financial hardship of traveling to this relatively remote prison meant that she would only be able to visit her husband at best quarterly instead of twice a month, as would have been possible if he had been imprisoned in or near HCMC. Visitation procedures also were cumbersome: each time that she wanted to visit, she needed to have an application certified by HCMC police authorities, she explained. Moreover, the visitation request process could not begin until she received formal notification from GVN authorities that her husband had been transferred. Mrs. Que's MPS contact indicated to her that this would come "soon."

4. (SBU) Similarly, a family member of imprisoned activist Dr. Pham Hong Son informed Embassy that Son had also been moved to Prison #5 in Thanh Hoa Province. The family member reported that Son's wife had traveled to the new prison on September 12, but was refused access to her husband as he was reportedly being punished for refusing to wear his prison uniform. Son had apparently worn civilian clothes in his previous prison. Son's family had not received any letters from him since the transfer. The family member speculated that the transfer to a more distant prison was done to punish Son's wife for her frequent meetings with foreign diplomats and members of the international press to highlight his case, adding that officials had previously threatened this possibility in an attempt to silence her (Ref B).

5. (SBU) Son's wife last visited him on August 16 and after that visit reported to Radio Free Asia that Son was suffering from a hernia. Son's family member confirmed the report to Poloff and added that Son, who is himself a physician, admitted to his wife that he had had the condition for more than five months and said that the prison did not have facilities to treat it. Son's wife apparently raised her concerns to the prison authorities, but was told his health was being "appropriately" treated. After the RFA report, calls from Reporters Without Borders and inquiries from international journalists, the Foreign Ministry publicly denied on September 24 that Son was in ill health. However, family members indicated to us on October 11 that he might receive an operation "imminently."

6. (SBU) Comment: Although the GVN has in the past incarcerated a number of political prisoners in Prison #5, more recently the authorities seem to have used Ba Sao (also known as Nam Ha) Prison in Ha Nam Province for these prisoners. The transfer of these two high-profile individuals to the more remote Prison #5 may well be an attempt to distance them from their families, with the GVN seeking to block the flow of information about them to journalists, activists and foreign governments. We will remain in contact with Dr. Son's family to see if he is indeed able to receive his operation. End comment.

MARINE